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A NEW LOOK AT THE ERGON ARGUMENT IN THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

Alfonso Gomez-Lobo, Georgetown University, for SAGP 1988

It is commonly assumed that the ergon argument consists in an inference which starts from the powers specific or peculiar to man and arrives at a definition of the human good. This would commit Aristotle to some form of naturalism which is either fallacious or at least not available to us because we cannot share his views about human nature.

The purpose of the present paper is to show that this interpretation is unsatisfactory. Aristotle's argument is based on a general principle which may be reformulated as follows: "For any x, if x has an ergon y, then x will be a good x, if and only if x produces good instances of y."

The prior identification of the human ergon is then required in order to know what to evaluate when passing judgement on whether a human being is a good human being or not. The specification of the ergon must be achieved in an evaluatively neutral way since the ergon by itself does not provide any standard. I argue that this is conveyed by the expression energeia kai praxeis meta logou. Specifically human are all actions, right or wrong, which may be so precisely because they are accompanied by a logos.

This in turn allows us to understand another troublesome expression Aristotle uses to refer to the characteristic activity of human beings: energeia kata logon e me aneu logou, "activity according to reason or not without reason." I argue that it is wrong to take the first disjunct as referring to the part of the soul which has reason in itself and the second one to the part of the soul which obeys reason (Irwin). The disjunction stands for positive and negative evaluation of human activity, respectively. To act well in the moral, practical and theoretical domain amounts to acting according to the logos, i.e. according to the corresponding virtues. Failure in the moral, practical and theoretical domain, on the other hand, is not totally irrational: the coward throws away his shield to preserve his life, a fool deliberates well towards a bad end, and a mistake in theoretical thought implies entertaining a logos which happens to be false.

No inference from the ergon to the good takes place. On the contrary, the normative weight in Aristotle's ethics is carried by his analyses of the virtues. They provide the standards to judge good and bad performances of the human ergon.

I finally argue that the conclusion of the ergon argument does not rest on metaphysical or psychological premises (although they are not inconsistent, of course, with the doctrine of potentiality and actuality, etc. in the Metaphysics nor with anything held in the De Anima). Accordingly, I fail to see here an attempt to "ground" a universal answer to the question of how we should live in a theory of human nature."

A NEW LOOK AT THE ERGON ARGUMENT IN THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

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Recent discussion of Aristotle's inference of the definition of eudaimonia has focused, as far as I can see, on three important problems: whether Aristotle is successful in showing that man has a function or not, whether the premises of the argument are dialectical as opposed to metaphysical/psychological (or perhaps even of a different sort), and whether the wording of the conclusion commits him to an inclusive or a dominant conception of the human good.¹

At the outset of the present paper I would like to leave these issues unresolved in order to examine first how the argument actually works. Towards the end I shall be in a position to say a word or two about them.

I see two reasons to reopen the debate on this aspect of the ergon argument. On the one hand, there is a widely held way of understanding the argument which seems to commit Aristotle to some form of fallacious naturalism. There has been some opposition to this, but I think a more precise argumentation can be offered against it. On the other hand, one of the most authoritative English translations of the N.E. circulating today (that of T. Irwin)² seems to me to give a highly misleading rendering of the argument. Given the influence of this translation in the teaching of Aristotelian ethics at different levels, I think it is important to call attention to what may well be a more correct rendering of a crucial passage.

I

I would like to start by giving a few examples of the general view that I shall criticize. I take them from two works that are likely to fall into the hands of anyone studying the N.E. today.

In the second edition of W.F.R. Hardie's well known book on Aristotle's Ethical Theory we read that

"...starting from the conceptions of the powers which are specific or peculiar to men as members of the class of living beings, Aristotle arrives at a tentative definition of the human good (1097 a 33 - 1098 a 20)."³

Although the expressions "starting from" and "arriving at" are somewhat vague, there is a suggestion here that an argumentative step

is taken from a psychological premise about human powers or dynamis to the ethical notion of the human good.

In the excellent anthology of Essays on Aristotle's Ethics edited by A. O. Rorty something similar is held by K. Wilkes. She writes:

"A study of man's ergon, then, can tell us what it is to be a good man, once we have discovered just what activities are indeed characteristic of mankind."⁴

Since "what it is to be a good man" stands for an evaluative question, indeed the question which is answered by giving a definition of the human good or happiness, we here have once again the idea of some kind of inference from the ergon of man to a basic ethical notion.

In the same collection of articles T. Nagel goes even further when he holds that

"The proper ergon of man, by which human excellence is measured, is that which makes him a man rather than anything else."⁵ (my emphasis, not Nagel's)

I am not sure I am being uncharitable in the interpretation of this quotation, but it does suggest to me that the ergon of man is expected to provide something like a measuring rod to determine the value of actions and/or persons. If these accord with the ergon, then they are good; if they accord perfectly, then they are excellent. It would not be difficult to rephrase this kind of relation between a measuring rod or standard and what is thereby measured in terms of premises and conclusion. The only doubt in my mind is whether the premise involving the ergon or characteristic activity of man is conceived by Nagel as descriptive or as evaluative.

Regardless of this last doubt, what seems to emerge from these examples (and many more quotations along these lines could be easily produced) is a pattern of interpretation of the ergon argument which could be set out schematically as follows:

(Premise 1) "Human beings have a characteristic activity E,"

therefore,

(Conclusion) "The good for human beings is to exercise the

characteristic activity E."

A more refined version of the pattern may well include a further premise which is both universal and evaluative and thus allows for a valid inference:

(Premise 2) "The good of any being (or perhaps any natural or living substance) consists in its exercising its characteristic activity or ergon."

II

I would now like to argue that the aforementioned way of presenting the argument is most probably wrong. I shall try to show that Aristotle does not arrive at a definition of happiness starting exclusively from the powers specific to man, that a study of man's ergon by itself cannot tell us what it is to be a good man, that the proper ergon of man is not that by which human excellence is measured and that the good for humans does not consist in the unqualified exercise of the ergon.

In order to make these somewhat sweeping denials plausible, I shall analyse the long conditional sentence in the text which contains the inference. But before doing so, a few words must be said about the context in which it appears.

Aristotle has argued that a correct definition of eudaimonia must specify something which is both final, i.e. always chosen for its own sake but never for the sake of something else, and self-sufficient, i.e. such that it includes all basic goods.⁶ He then proceeds to argue that a correct definition can be found if we first ascertain the function or ergon of man. The justification for this strategy is given by means of a general principle which runs as follows:

(Principle 1) "For all things that have a function [ergon ti] or activity [praxis], the good [tagathon] and the 'well' [to eu] is thought to reside in the function."⁷

There seem to be two possible ways of understanding this principle: (a) one can take it to mean that it is good and "well" for things that have a function to exercise that function, in which case it would be equivalent to what I have called Premise 2, or (b) it can be taken to express that the good and "well" for things that have a function, i.e. the truth of a positive evaluative proposition about them, depends on the quality of the function.

I am inclined to think that the second is the correct interpretation. Aristotle's inductive basis in the context includes "a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist." If we keep in mind that ergon also means "work" in the sense of the product of a techne or craft, it will become clear that what he means is that a positive judgement about a flute-player or a sculptor is the result of a positive evaluation of the actual musical performance or of the statue itself, respectively. A good lyre-player, Aristotle will say in the sequel, is one who plays the lyre well.⁸

Just to play the lyre, i.e. the mere activation of the ergon, cannot be good since if it is done poorly the musician turns out to be a bad musician and it cannot be good for a musician to be a bad musician.

The interpretation, then, that should be accepted may be formulated as follows:

(Principle 1_a) "For any x, if x has an ergon y, then x will be a good x if and only if x produces good instances of y."

Since for Aristotle the good for man is to be a good man, i.e. a high quality individual of the human species, the search for the human good requires that we first identify the characteristic activity of man. Otherwise we may not be able to pass the prior evaluative judgement upon which the judgement about human good ought to be founded. This does not mean that the identification of the ergon of man by itself will do the job. It only means that we will know where to look for a necessary and sufficient condition to decide when a human life is indeed a good human life. Much of what follows will tend to reinforce this.

The ergon or defining work of man is first described by Aristotle as

praktike tis [sc. zoe] tou logon echontos

"an active life of that which has logos."⁹

Appealing to Politics 1325 b 14 ff., Stewart rightly indicates in his note ad loc. that this should not be taken to restrict the human ergon to action as opposed to contemplation.¹⁰ It should rather be taken in its most general sense: the defining work of man, the one thing only humans can do, is to lead the life of the part of the soul

which contains reason or speech. Typically human, then, is the activation of the capacity to think. Thought and reason, however, are present in a variety of aspects of our lives and it would be idle to try to pin Aristotle down to some specific form of thought at this stage of the game. Since in the argument proper there are three further characterizations of the human ergon, I shall have more to say about this below.

What is clear for the moment is that under the most plausible interpretation of Principle 1 the evaluation of the life of reason will allow us to infer when a man is a good man.

This move, I would like to suggest, is exactly what the lengthy conditional whose consequent turns out to be the definition of eudaimonia is supposed to accomplish.

III

Let us now take a closer look at the wording of the ergon argument. I quote it in the Revised Oxford Translation with some modifications and inserting the key Greek terms:

"Now if the function [ergon] of man is an activity of the soul [psyches energeia] in accordance with, or not without, rational principle [kata logon e me aneu logou], and if we say a so-and-so and a good so-and-so have a function which is the same in kind, e.g. a lyre-player and a good lyre-player, and so without qualification in all cases, eminence in respect of excellence [kata ten areten] being added to the function (for it is a mark of the lyre-player to play the lyre, and of the good lyre-player to do so well): if this is the case, [and we state that the function of man is a certain kind of life, and this an activity [energeia] and actions [praxeis] implying a rational principle [meta logou], and that it is a mark of the good man to perform these well and nobly, and if any action is well performed in accordance with the appropriate excellence [kata ten oikeian areten]: if this is the case,] human good turns out to be activity of soul in conformity with excellence [kat'areten], if there are more than one excellence, in conformity with the best and most complete [kata ten aristen kai teleiotaten]."11

I have allowed myself to modify the ROT at two places (lines 11-12 and 14) where it prints "the function of" without there really

being an occurrence of the word ergon in the text. It is, of course, true that the genitives that appear could tacitly depend on ergon as supplied by the context, but it seems to me both more natural and better suited to the flow of the argument to assume that we here have the perfectly common construction of genitive + form of einai + infinitive and translate "it is a mark of (noun) to (infinitive)" or "it is peculiar to (noun) to (infinitive)".¹² What this implies is that in this context Aristotle avoids the use of the expression "the ergon of the good man". Indeed, his argument relies heavily on the assumption that this expression does not have a straightforward referent.

How the argument is supposed to work is not at all clear. The best I can offer by way of analysis is the following list of ingredients:

(A) First we should note the inductive basis, i.e. the uncontroversial starting points, which seem to be represented by the references to the lyre-player. There are two of them:

(A₁) "a lyre-player and a good lyre-player are said to have the same ergon."

(A₂) "peculiar to a lyre-player is to play the lyre, and to the good lyre-player to do so well."

(B) The second set of ingredients are the generalizations based upon the previous instances:

(B₁) "For any agent x who performs an ergon and any agent y who performs that ergon well, the erga are generically identical."

This principle, which is supported by (A₁), implies that the notion of ergon is a neutral, descriptive one. By itself the reference to the characteristic activity of something does not convey an evaluation of any kind. The good and bad performances are, of course, not strictly identical, otherwise we would not pass divergent judgements on them, but they are generically identical in that both are performances of the same activity, an activity, I would venture to say, which can be established in both cases by the same kind of quasi-empirical, or direct, inspection.

This is further conveyed by the second generalization:

(B₂) "In order to distinguish between an unqualified performer and a good performer of an ergon, eminence in respect to excellence

has to be added to the specification of the ergon."

This is supported by (A₂) and states that there is no ergon peculiar to the good performer. His ergon is simply the ergon of any performer but with something added to it: its excellence. (B₂) also seems to indicate that the evaluative judgement about the performance of an ergon is logically independent of the discovery and neutral description of the characteristic activity of a given class of objects or persons. Perhaps an apt way to illustrate this would be to say that someone who travels to a distant country, e.g. to India, can realize that in that country certain individuals play an instrument similar to the lyre. But to judge which of those musicians are good performers and which are not requires an altogether different kind of expertise based on adequate knowledge of the conventions governing musical performance within that culture. This judgement represents something over and above the mere realization that some individuals produce generically the same sounds by playing the same instrument.

If the foregoing is correct, Aristotle would be saying that in order to identify a good F (or the goodness for Fs) two logically distinguishable steps must be taken: first, the ergon of Fs has to be ascertained in a non-evaluative manner, and then, an evaluative judgement as to what counts as a good performance of that ergon has to be passed. This latter judgement is equivalent to finding the arete or aretai corresponding specifically to the class of Fs. The ergon and the good are thus not strictly identical.

All of this is supposed to hold for particular human activities. The last ingredient then moves on to

(C) the application of the foregoing to the case of man as such.

Virtually all commentators I have consulted fail to realize that what Aristotle requires in the context, as a first step, is a neutral, purely descriptive specification of the ergon of man. This has led to a rather muddled account of the different formulae in the text in which the term logos appears (kata logon e me aneu logou, meta logou). Another factor that has contributed to the general confusion, I believe, is the difficulty in using such terms as "reason", "rational" or "rationally" in English and other languages without conveying a positive evaluation. It is odd to say that someone conducted her actions with reason and to add that her actions were blameworthy.

A close look at the text will show that, apart from the specification of the ergon of man prior to the argument itself ("an active life of that which has the logos"), there are three expressions within the argument that are used to refer to it:

- (i) psyches energeia kata logon e me aneu logou,
- (ii) psyches energeia kai praxeis meta logou, and
- (iii) psyches energeia.¹³

It seems clear that (iii) is a short-hand reference back to (i) and/or (ii). One should expect, of course, that these two will be equivalent, but how, exactly?

T. Irwin in his translation achieves a certain equivalence by rendering (ii) by "the soul's activity and actions that express reason" and (i) by "the soul's activity that expresses reason [as itself having reason] or requires reason [as obeying reason]" (his brackets).¹⁴

I find this unsatisfactory on several grounds. First, to translate here and elsewhere kata with the accusative by "expressing" is rather misleading because the reader tends to lose sight of the normative implications of the Greek. One's actions may or may not express something, but this is quite different from whether they follow or fail to follow a rule or principle. An action may display a rule by not following it. Second, the two occurrences of logos in (i) are assigned by Irwin by means of the expressions in brackets to reason proper and to the appetitive part of the soul, respectively. This is unconvincing because the virtues of the appetitive part, i.e. the moral virtues, not only require reason, but are precisely instances of acting kata logon, in accordance with reason. This is what obeying reason amounts to in their case.¹⁵ Third, the expressions kata logon and meta logou are used elsewhere by Aristotle to mark a contrast between two different things. It is therefore dangerous to lump them together under one single English expression.

The contrast I have in mind between kata and meta preceeding the term logos is found in N.E. VI.13, a passage in which Aristotle criticises the Socratic conception of moral virtue. There, among other things, he says:

"...it is not merely the state in accordance with right reason [kata ton orthon logon], but the state that implies the presence of right reason [meta tou orthou logou], that is excellence."¹⁶

In his commentary Grant relies heavily on this passage for his interpretation of I.7. Indeed, he understands the transition from kata logon to meta logou in the passage from the first book as follows:

"A machine might be said to move kata logon, 'in accordance with a law', but not meta logou, 'with a consciousness of a law.' It is this consciousness of the law which, according to Hegel, distinguishes morality (*Moralitaet*) from mere propriety (*Sittlichkeit*)."¹⁷

As his words show, Grant is taking both expressions involving logos in an evaluatively positive sense. This also holds for his understanding of me aneu logou on which he comments in the following terms:

"In the euphuēs and the sophron, where desires flow naturally to what is good, reason would seem rather to be presupposed (hou ouk aneu) than directly to assert itself."¹⁸

As I have already suggested, this is unsatisfactory because if anything can be properly described as action kata logon is surely sophrosyne. Here it is not so much a question of reason "asserting" itself but rather of reason being in fact followed. To say that temperance is "not without reason" would be a very weak description of what counts as rational behaviour par excellence in the domain of the appetitive part of the soul.

I suspect that Grant has been misled to identify the clearly evaluative expression meta tou orthou logou from VI.13 with the (as I am trying to argue) neutral phrase meta logou of I.7. If Grant were right in understanding the human ergon as actions not only in accordance with a law (his translation of logos), but also with a consciousness of a law, Aristotle would be committing a serious blunder by adding to that specification of the ergon, as he says we should, the eminence in respect to excellence or virtue:

"and it is a mark of the good man [to perform] these [sc. the actions meta logou] well and nobly."¹⁹

To consciously follow a law is already to act well and nobly. Therefore, the addition that the good man performs them well and nobly is a mistaken reduplication. I conclude, then, that the evaluative understanding of meta logou must be abandoned.

In order to reach a satisfactory alternative interpretation it would be useful to call to mind the passage in the Metaphysics in which Aristotle discusses certain dynamēis or capacities which are only found "in things possessed of soul, and in soul, i.e. in [the part] of the soul that has logos."²⁰ These he calls dynamēis meta logou and sets them apart from the alogoi dynamēis, the capacities that do not have logos.

The difference between them consists in the following. A capacity without logos produces only one effect, e.g. the hot is only capable of heating. A capacity with logos is alike capable of contrary effects, e.g. the medical art can produce both disease and health.

The reason for this, Aristotle explains, is that "the logos manifests the thing itself and its privation"²¹ "for it is by denial and removal that it manifests the contrary."²²

To show how this is supposed to work would require extensive textual analysis. The important consideration for the present purposes is that being meta logou is no guarantee for a good use of a technical skill or craft. Indeed, Aristotle is willing to generalize the point at the end of the chapter in which he has discussed the dynamis meta logou, the capacities with reason:

"It is obvious also that the potentiality [dynamis] of merely doing [poein] a thing or having it done to one [pathein] is implied in that of doing or having it done well, but the latter is not always implied in the former: for he who does a thing well must also do it, but he who does it merely need not also do it well."²³

The conclusion I would venture to draw from this passage (which incidentally shows a clear awareness on the part of Aristotle of the fallacy of going from fact to value) is that we now have a clue to understand Aristotle's reference to the ergon of man by means of the phrase "activity and actions meta logou". He does not have in mind activity and actions that express reason (Irwin) in the sense of following the logos, nor actions "indissolublement unies à la règle" (Gauthier-Joliv) because some of them may be in clear violation of a rule.

What Aristotle has in mind are simply actions, right or wrong, which may be so precisely because they are accompanied by a logos or awareness of a propositional account of some sort which can be affirmed or denied by the agent. Needless to say, these are the actions in which only humans can engage. They constitute our characteristic activity.

If this settles the interpretation of formula (ii) we may now reap its fruits for the interpretation of (i). What we should expect is that meta logou in the context was meant simply to refer back to the disjunction kata logon e me aneu logou. If this is the case, then these should not refer to two different capacities of the soul, as Irwin's translation suggests, but rather to the good and the bad use of reason, respectively.

No one will dispute, I trust, that in the domain of the appetitive part of the soul action in conformity with reason corresponds to the exercise of the moral virtues, i.e. to the good use of reason within this domain. If doubts exist it should be sufficient to quote Aristotle's closing statements on sophrosyne or temperance in Book III:

"...and if appetites are strong and violent they even expel the power of calculation [ton logismon]. Hence they should be moderate and few, and should in no way oppose reason [the logos] - and this is what we call an obedient and chastened state - and as the child should live according to the direction of his tutor, so the appetitive element should live according to reason [kata ton logon]. Hence the appetitive element in a temperate man should harmonize with reason [the logos]."²⁴

In the domain of reason itself (to logon echon)²⁵ as opposed to that which obeys the logos, Aristotle seems to favor a different expression for positive evaluation. Just as in the domain of the moral virtues kata logon is often expanded into the more precise expression kata ton orthon logon,²⁶ the intellectual virtues are defined by a qualified reference to logos. Craft or techne is said to be "a productive habit with true logos"²⁷ and phronesis or prudence "a practical habit with true logos."²⁸ I conjecture that both in the case of a sound medical decision and of a right prudential one Aristotle would be willing to say that the agent acted in accordance with reason and thereby mean that a true technical or practical proposition accounts for the action.

To take me aneu logou in an evaluatively negative sense, however, seems to be the greatest challenge which the present reconstruction has to face. Why didn't Aristotle use para logon if he wanted to express the opposite of action performed kata logon? The correct reply is, I think, that this new expression conveys an altogether different idea. Something that is para ton logon is outside the domain of reason, it is something different and not just a wrong use of reason. In I.13 this phrase is used to introduce the appetitive or desiring element of the soul, an element which is distinct from the one that has the logos in the strict sense.²⁹ Moreover, actions that are para logon because the agent is totally out of his mind would hardly count as specifically human.

I conjecture that what Aristotle has in mind is roughly something of this nature: the coward, the man who throws away his shield to preserve his life, certainly does not act according to the logos³⁰, but his actions are not completely devoid of reason. A certain explanation or rationalization of them is possible. The lyric poets Archilochus, Alcaeus and Anacreon have no qualms about confessing

the loss of their weapons to save themselves.³¹ By reference to their self-preservation their actions were by no means totally irrational.

Failure in the domain of the intellectual virtues is also not without reason. If one sets before himself a bad goal and deliberates correctly to attain it, Aristotle would not call that an instance of excellence in deliberation [eubloulia]. In order to apply this term he requires that something good be attained. And yet he would not deny that reason is at work in both cases:

"...the man who is deliberating, whether he does so well or ill, is searching for something and calculating [logizetai]."³²

Again, a failure in prudence because pleasure or pain have "destroyed and perverted" one's judgement [hypolepsis] does not amount to a total elimination of reason. It simply means that one has failed to grasp a true practical proposition and has therefore acted on a false one.³³ Something similar can be argued for the use of theoretical reason [to epistemonikon] although in this case the failure to grasp the truth of a proposition cannot be attributed to our emotions nor to the experience of pleasure and pain. A mistake in a demonstrative science is not without logos because it still consists in entertaining a logos, albeit a false one.

IV

I have hitherto tried to show that in the ergon argument the Aristotelian expressions kata logon and me aneu logou correspond to the positive and the negative evaluation of the use of reason in the appetitive, the practical and the theoretical domain. The expression meta logou in turn covers both of them.

Thus the premise including a reference to the human function is not evaluative at all. It is purely descriptive. But this does not imply that an inference from fact to value has taken place. As we saw, Aristotle is perfectly aware that a fallacy would be involved if that were done. The evaluative premise that allows for a valid inference is the principle introduced at the beginning. Therefore, the argument itself is best set out as follows:

(1) "For any x, if x has an ergon y, then x will be a good x, if and only if x produces good instances of y." (= Principle 1a)

(2) "The ergon of man is activity with reason."

Therefore,

(3) "A human being will be a good human being if and only if he

produces good instances of activity with reason."

If the foregoing diagnosis of the argument is correct, some interesting consequences seem to follow for the contemporary debate.

First, it should become clear that attempts to deny that man has an ergon or characteristic activity by producing (often amusing) lists of human activities are certainly misguided. A recent commentator writes:

"He [sc. Aristotle]...would see that man makes love, buys and sells, plots revenge, collects bits of string, listens to Mozart (or soft Lydian airs), washes his socks, travels to Ionia (or, as it may be, Toronto), worships God, exploits his neighbour, practices virtue, lies, cheats, murders, and does metaphysics."³⁴

Aristotle would, of course, see this but he surely would add that the criterion used to set up the list in the first place is that all of the items included are performed according to reason or at least not without reason. Otherwise they would not belong on the list. In other words, the human ergon is conceived by Aristotle in very general terms and therefore does not exclude any activity, however perverse or mistaken, as long as it involves reason.

Second, the clarification that follows the conclusion ("if there are more than one excellence, in conformity with the best and most complete") seems to point in the direction of the inclusive interpretation. If the ergon of man is taken at a high level of generality, then it is natural to expect that the set of good uses of reason, i.e. of virtues, will be quite broad. Indeed, it has to be the complete set by virtue of the self-sufficiency argument: the best human being will be the one who, ideally, of course, activates reason well in all domains of action with reason. If a man acts in accordance with the virtue of the contemplative faculty but fails to act virtuously in the moral domain, then he is not the best man. Better than him is the practitioner of both intellectual and moral virtues.

Third, I would very much hesitate to call the first premise a metaphysical principle. It is of course not inconsistent with Aristotle's doctrines of potentiality and actuality, but admission of its truth does not require reading the Metaphysics. It seems to be something like a common-sense principle for evaluation. Indeed, I would say that we normally conduct our evaluations in this way. We identify whatever is specific to the class to which an individual belongs (the class of architects, hotels, azaleas, bull-dogs, etc.) and then proceed to ask if this particular one represents those activities or characteristics well.

Such a rule, then, does not require initiation into the

subtleties of metaphysics. But this does not make it an endoxon either because it is known to be true by any agent who exercises rational choice.

What about the second premise, is it not grounded on Aristotelian psychology? There is no doubt that in the quest for the human ergon Aristotle alludes to the three layers of life he has carefully sorted out in the De Anima. There is first the life of nutrition and growth, then the life of perception, and finally the life of the part of the soul that has logos.³⁵ There is no reference in the passage of the N.E., however, to nous or noein, to the way noesis operates in relation to perception or phantasia, etc., i.e. to any of the distinctively Aristotelian positions in rational psychology. Indeed, the characterization of the human ergon in any of its four formulations is so vague that it hardly deserves to be called "a psychological doctrine" at all. No study of the De Anima is required to accept the view that humans and only humans are beings that can give a rational account of their actions, whether such an account be true or false, persuasive or unpersuasive, an acceptable justification or a mere rationalization.

This brings me to my fourth, and last, conclusion. Apart from an incidental use of pephyke in a rhetorical question,³⁶ the ergon argument does not make an explicit appeal to human nature to support any normative conclusion. Its conclusion is evaluative, but it does not provide any normative criteria, i.e. it does not tell us exactly how we should conduct our lives in order to attain the human good. The normative weight in Aristotle's ethics is carried by the analyses of the virtues because they constitute good uses of reason. In his ethics something ought to be done not because it is natural, but rather because it is virtuous, i.e. good, to do it. I fail to see on what aspect of human nature one would have to focus in order to state, e.g. that one ought to be courageous and not play the coward, or that one ought to be practically wise and not a fool. If human nature is supposed to be a descriptive concept we may end in practical perplexity because cowardice and foolishness would certainly appear in any realistic portrait of the common features of human beings. But if the appeal to human nature is evaluative, then Aristotle's argument may well work the other way around: it is because courage is good that we are entitled to view it as hexis kata physin, as the "natural" habit, in contrast with "unnatural" cowardice.

I have barely touched the surface of a topic that deserves careful treatment. I just hope that this new look at the ergon argument will make fellow scholars think twice before attributing to Aristotle a kind of naturalism which is not to be found at least in the passage where one would most expect to uncover it.

NOTES

1. Some of the ideas presented here were first developed in my paper "Sobre la inferencia de la definición aristotélica de la felicidad," Revista de Filosofía (Universidad de Chile) 27/28 (1986) 15-23. An earlier version was presented at the Dayton Aristotle colloquium in Nov. 1987. I am grateful to Deborah Achtenberg and Tom Tuozzo for helpful criticism.
2. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Indianapolis, 1985.
3. W.F.R. Hardie, Aristotle's Ethical Theory, Second Edition, Oxford, 1980, p. 362.
4. K. V. Wilkes, "The good man and the good for man in Aristotle's ethics" in A.O. Rorty (ed), Essays in Aristotle's Ethics, Berkeley, 1980, p. 343.
5. T. Nagel, "Aristotle on eudaimonia", in Rorty, Essays, p. 8.
6. N.E. I.7.1097 a 25 - 1097 b 21.
7. N.E. 1097 b 26-27. Unless otherwise noted, I shall be quoting from the Revised Oxford Translation (ROT): The Complete Works of Aristotle, ed. by J. Barnes, Princeton, 1984.
8. N.E. I.7.1098 a 12.
9. N.E. I.7.1098 a 2-3 (my trans.)
10. J. A. Stewart, Notes on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle, Oxford, 1892 (reprint New York, 1973), Vol. I, p. 99.
11. N.E. 1098 a 7-18. I have retained Bywater's bracketing of lines 12-16, but I see no reason to delete these well-attested lines.
12. Instances of this construction in the near context are found at 1094 b 23-24, 1098 a 22 and 25-26. C. Kahn, The Verb to Be in Ancient Greek, Dordrecht, 1973, p. 168 gives an example from Xenophon (Anab. II.I.4) under the heading "Genitive of Belonging to (as Property or Distinctive Mark)." My attention to the possibility of reading this construction was first called by the Spanish translation of Antonio Gómez Robledo (Aristóteles, Ética Nicomachea, México, 1983).
13. N.E.N.E. I.7.1098 a 7-8, 13-14 and 16.
14. Irwin trans. p. 17.
15. This had already been argued by Gauthier-Joliv against earlier commentators (L'Éthique à Nicomaque, Louvain/Paris, 1970, Tome II, Première Partie, p. 59) but without explaining the expression me aneu

logou. Stewart (p. 100) attributes to the Paraphrast and to Eustratius the same distribution suggested by Irwin. Stewart himself follows it when he says about me aneu logou "...such a negative expression is well fitted to designate the obedience of the passions to reason, as distinguished from the spontaneous activity of reason itself in the sphere of thought."

16. N.E. VI.13.1144 b 26-27.

17. A. Grant, The Ethics of Aristotle illustrated with essays and notes, London, 1885 (reprint New York, 1973), Vol. I, p. 450.

18. Grant, ibid.

19. N.E. I.7.1098 a 14-15 (my trans.).

20. Met. IX.2.1046 a 36 - 1046 b 1.

21. Met. IX.2.1046 b 8-9 (my trans.).

22. Met. IX.2.1046 b 13-14 (my trans.).

23. Met. IX.2.1046 b 24-28.

24. N.E. III.12.1119 b 10-16.

25. N.E. VI.2.1139 a 4 and 5.

26. N.E. II.2.1103 b 32.

27. N.E. VI.4.1140 a 20-21.

28. N.E. VI.5.1140 b 20-21 (my trans.). In my rendering I follow the reading alethous of the Marcianus and of William of Moerbeke's original. This is in conflict with 1140 b 5 where alethe goes with hexin and no varia lectio is signalled in Bywater's apparatus. The notion that the habit can be true is a difficult one and I suspect that under pressure most interpreters would end up saying that what that means is that prudence is the habit of grasping true practical propositions and acting accordingly. But this same view is directly conveyed by the formula meta logou alethous.

29. N.E. I.13.1102 b 17 and 24.

30. N.E. III.7.1115 b 19-20: "for the brave man feels and acts according to the merits of the case and in whatever way reason [logos] directs."

31. Cf. D.A.Campbell, The Golden Lyre, The themes of the Greek lyric poets, London, 1983, pp. 85 and 100.

32. N.E. VI.9.1142 b 14-15.

33. N.E. VI.5.1140 b 11-21.

34. B. Suits, "Aristotle on the function of man: fallacies, heresies and other entertainments," Canadian Journal of Philosophy 4 (1974) 39.

35. N.E. I.7.1097 b 33 - 1098 a 4.

36. N.E. I.7.1097 b 30.